

Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER V

Joseph H. Polley

Wilson County

WHEN Joseph H. Polley left his home in White Plains, New York, riding a sorrel, and with the huge sum of fifty cents in his pocket, he had taken the first step toward becoming one of the foremost citizens of early Texas. Today on the banks of the Cibolo, two miles north of the famous old town of Sutherland Springs on the Seguin and Gonzales road stands the stately old Polley house—a living monument of the grandeur enjoyed by some of the settlers of Texas during slavery. At his death, his cattle brand JHP (connected) was registered in many of the cattle counties in Southwest Texas. The earliest recording was in Brazoria county in 1837. His herds of longhorns were estimated, by some, to be second in number only to the great King holdings.

During the time when depredations were being committed by Mexicans over 16,000 head were reputed to have been stolen or killed from the Polley herds.

The Polley home is one of the best preserved mansions of antebellum days in that section of the State. It is a two-story solid stone building, with five open fireplaces, and with walls eighteen inches thick, the rock quarried about three miles away and hauled in ox-drawn wagons, driven by slaves, over the Old Indian Crossing. The lime used was burned in a kiln just above the house. The wood work is made of cypress beams which were also hauled by ox teams from distant saw mills. Wooden pins, instead of nails, were used throughout the house. The log-cabin kitchen, out in the back yard, was constructed of carefully hewn post oak logs, with a large open fireplace. Both have withstood the strain and wear of ninety years and are still in a good state of preservation. They still overlook the peaceful valley of the Cibolo where the slaves once cultivated the fields of cotton and corn; where the cotton was ginned; and just beyond where great herds of cattle grazed. In the yard is an underground cistern to catch rain

water and this is said to be as good as it was when it was first built.

Mr. Polley was a well educated gentleman of that time. He was one of the original 300 colonists who were to come with Moses Austin. In 1821 he joined Stephen F. Austin's colony. It is interesting that he married Mary Bailey, daughter of Brit Bailey, who was the first Captain of Militia organized by Austin's colony. And Joseph Polley was the first sheriff appointed by Stephen F. Austin.

Mr. and Mrs. Polley were married three times; first by an alcalde; then they were married by a Presbyterian minister because they wanted to be married by a preacher of the gospel. A few years later, in accordance with an edict issued by the Mexican Government, to be landowners, they had to be married by a priest. The enactment of this ceremony entitled each of their children to a headright of a section of land. When they were married the third time, 30 couples went through with the ceremony.

Member Austin's Colony

Mrs. Polley probably had a better background for pioneer life than Mr. Polley. Her father was an educated man noted for his honesty and integrity. He had come to Texas three years before the arrival of Austin's colony, and settled on Bailey Prairie in Brazoria county. Mr. Bailey was a trusted friend of the Indians, even when they were hostile to the other colonists. Many stories have been told since his death of lights that flit around his old home and through the neighborhood. These stories might have originated because of a peculiar request in his will, and because he often remarked during his life, "All my life I have traveled West, and I never looked up to any man, so I do not want it said, 'here lies old Brit Bailey'." So in accordance with his request he was buried standing up in the yard of his home, with his face to the West.

The first few years after their marriage the Polleys lived at San Felipe de Austin. After Texas became a republic, because of a growing family and increasing herds, Mr. Polley looked for a location farther West. Through John James, Jr., who later married one of his daughters, he secured a large grant of land in the present Wilson county. The place was suited to the needs of the family. It was not too far from San Antonio where the children could be sent to school. Thousands of acres of grazing land were available. There was enough land suitable for cultivation on which feed could be grown.

The family moved into a small picket house until the "big stone house" could be built. Smaller houses were erected near the back for Negro or slave quarters. Barns and corrals were built, and later a cotton gin.

The windows, doors and window shutters were ordered from New York. The greater part of the household furniture, including the rosewood piano, handsome sofa and chairs, and heavy wool carpets were also bought in New York through Mr. Polley's brother.

The yard was planted with beautiful shrubs and sodded with Bermuda grass. Among the shrubs that some of the grandchildren still remember were lavender, crepe myrtle, mock orange,

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hedges of pomegranite and salt cedar, and "Seven Sister Rose," a climber that entwined the great columns of the front porch. There were plenty of great shade trees.

Mr. Polley looked after his cattle scattered from Fort Bend county to Marble Falls, and from Corpus Christi to Austin. They were sold mostly on the San Antonio and New Orleans markets. Later his sons "went up the trail." Mrs. Polley was busy with the home duties. Each slave had to be trained for certain duties. As the daughters finished school they became responsible for certain activities of the home, and had charge of the slaves who did that work. For instance, Harriet, who later married Dr. Houston, near Lavonia, had charge of the weaving rooms. There were the carding, spinning and weaving to be done. The cloth had to be dyed and made into garments for the slaves and for everyday wear for the members of the family. Cotton was secured from the gin on the place, and wool sheared from a small herd of sheep kept for the purpose of producing wool to be made into clothes, blankets, coverlets and woolen mattresses as needed. Brown and blue were the favorite colors. Blue was made from wild indigo, and brown from live oak bark.

Mrs. Polley and all of her girls were good seamstresses and they made fine embroidery. Silk, bought through Mr. Polley's brother in New York, was used in making the "dress-up dresses." Each of the girls always had at least two or three. Fine linen was also purchased from New York. The girls were busy knitting yards and yards of lace to trim the ruffled underwear and bed linen. They also knitted gloves and stockings.

Mrs. Polley was probably the first woman in the country to get a sewing machine—a gift from her brother-in-law in New York. It was a Grover Baker, and though very crude compared with modern machines, it was the greatest time saver at that era. Mrs. Polley was so proud of it she did much of the sew-



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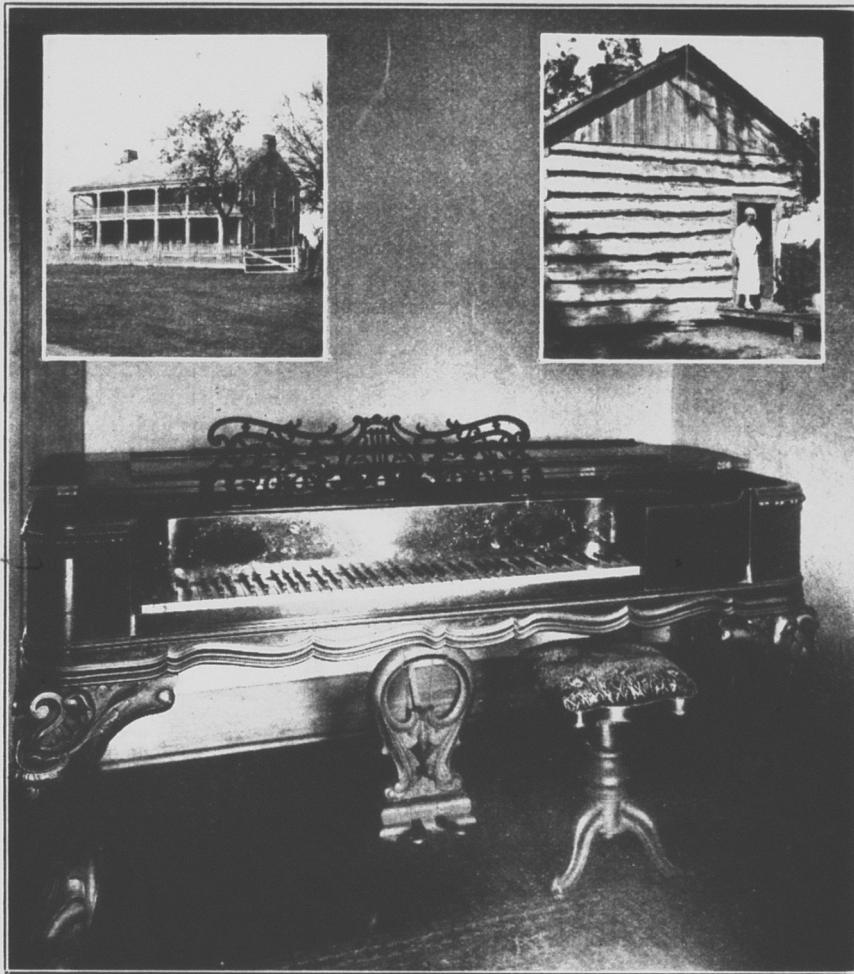
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Upper left: Old Polley home as it looks today. Upper right: Old smoke house, still standing. Center: The rosewood piano (picture bearing date on back, May 5, 1859). This piano, with pearl keys inlaid with mother of pearl, was shipped from New York to old Indianola and hauled in an ox drawn wagon to the Polley homestead.

ing for the neighbors because she was afraid to trust anyone else to use it.

Another big job that had to be directed by one of the Polley girls was the washing and ironing. A number of slaves were assigned to her to do this work. First the old fashioned lye soap must be made. The ash hopper was placed just north of the house, convenient for putting in all the ashes from the numerous fire places. The winter rains would sometimes rot the ashes, sufficiently, but during a dry winter extra water had to be poured over it. The large hopper was pyramidal in shape, the wider part used as the top. A small trough was placed at the bottom through which the amber liquid dripped into a bucket after having permeated slowly through the ashes. Cracklings, scraps of meat and bones were kept in a large can in the corner of the smokehouse to be used in making soap. This home made lye soap was used for both laundry and toilet purposes.

The making of bluing was another activity connected with the washing and ironing. It was made from wild indigo that grew in the nearby pastures. The green plant was placed in a barrel and soaked for several weeks, then boiled, allowed to settle, and the surplus water poured off. The sediment was then bottled and diluted as needed for the bluing of clothes. Water for washing was

drawn from deep wells, and ironing was done with heavy sadirons.

All of this work was done by Negro slaves. The family moved into the new home with ten Negro slaves. At the height of the Civil War there were 30.

Mrs. Polley personally directed the cooking, and actually did much of it. Groceries were bought about twice a year, and had to be brought by freight wagons from Indianola. Later many things could be brought from Lavernia. Flour was scarce. Both flour and sugar were bought by the barrel. Biscuits were a Sunday morning treat until after the Civil War.

The garden was planted and cared for by Negro slaves under the direction of Mrs. Polley. Potatoes, beans, corn, tomatoes, okra and sweet English peas were grown. "The English peas were a variety that the entire pod could be cooked," said Mrs. Connie Tiner, a granddaughter. "And they were better than any of the varieties we raise now."

Peach trees grown from seed were planted in the fields. Corn, okra and peaches were dried by the bushel. Peaches were also pickled and preserved.

There was always plenty of meat—venison, wild turkey, hogs, chickens and beef. Mrs. Polley personally directed the butchering and curing of the meat. The hogs usually ran wild, eating acorns, and were rounded up only at killing time.

But each year a few were put up and fattened on corn, because Mrs. Polley thought corn-fed hogs produced a better flavored lard. Beef was cut into chunks of 10 to 12 pounds each and pickled by putting the meat down in a barrel for about six weeks with sugar, salt and salt-peter, and a little soda. Then the meat was smoked.

"It tasted something like the corned beef we buy now," said Mrs. Tiner. "And it was served by shaving it off in thin slices and sometimes after boiling."

Venison was cured the same way. Enough sausage was made in the fall to last until the following spring. It was stuffed into casings and smoked at the same time as the other meat. The

smokehouse was a big room made of logs with a pit in the center for the fire.

Two of Mrs. Polley's favorite dishes were broiled sausage and broiled spare ribs, which she cooked on a gridiron she had made for that purpose. She also had a special oven made for roasting a whole pig, and still another for roasting turkeys.

The Polleys were famous for their old fashioned Southern hospitality. Many distinguished guests were entertained, among whom was General Robert E. Lee, a close personal friend of Mr. Polley's. He visited in the home many times and joined in the festivities of the community, and in the social functions of the home.

There were nearly always week-end guests, both summer and winter from San Antonio, Seguin, and farther distant places. The Polleys had good horses and were excellent riders. Wolf hunting was a favorite sport, and frequently they danced until way into the night. An old Negro, Uncle Do-Se-Do, played the fiddle for the dances. Coffee was served by the Negro slaves to every one in the house before rising in the morning and again in the afternoon. Sutherland Springs was famous at that time for its sulphur water. There were always plenty of horses available for the guests in going to and from the springs. Some preferred to go horse back, some rode in buggies and in hacks and others rode in the famed barouche which had been bought in New York.

Each Child Had Cattle

But the family was also happy at home alone. They shared in the property as well as in the social life. Each child owned some stock. While all the cattle bore the same brand, JHP (connected), each child knew his stock by name, such as "Old Brindle," "Spot," or "The Cow with a Crooked Horn." They played cards and chess. The girls were good musicians and many happy evenings were spent around the rosewood piano while an accompaniment was played to the violin and guitar, the entire family singing.

Mr. Polley was away from home quite a bit directing the care of his cattle and seeing after his business. He managed to get things done rather than do so much of it himself. While he was quiet and firm and talked very little, he was a pleasant companion to his children and grandchildren.

Mrs. Polley had full control of the entire family. She was a companion to each, entering into the social life with much enthusiasm, and enjoying the parties and dances as much as the young folks.

After the war when the slaves were freed and the cattle market was not so good the Polleys were hard hit just as many other families. Mr. Polley had made his will in 1862, while the war was on, and disposed of his slaves, with no thought that he would be dispossessed of his property as a result of the war. He died in 1869 and was buried on the old place, just across the road from where he lived in so much splendor.

Mrs. Polley lived until 1888. She continued to keep her house full of guests for several years. People came from far and near to take the baths at Sutherland Springs. Many of them became "paid guests" or summer boarders. If the young people wanted a dance, they would make up a purse of \$10. Mrs.

Polley would cook a supper of chicken, cake and coffee. They would sometimes dance all night, eating whenever they wished.

As she grew older and less active she devoted much of her time to knitting and piecing quilts and drove her own horse and buggy until she was quite old. She died in the same "back parlor" where her husband had died nearly 20 years before. Many of the grandchildren live in San Antonio, Floresville and other sections of Texas.

The old Polley place is now owned by C. A. Goeth of San Antonio. Emerson Hough visited it during his last visit to San Antonio just before his death. He was interested in the house and the romantic history of the family which built it.

The Polley children, all of whom are dead, were Augusta, who first married her cousin, Egbert. After his death she married W. K. Baylor and died at Sutherland Springs. Emmeline married John James, Jr., of San Antonio. Susan married C. F. Henderson. Joseph Benjamin married Mattie LeGat of Seguin. Adele and Kate did not marry. Harriet Roxanna married Dr. Houston of Lavernia. Hubbard married Bell Beverly. After her death he married Fannie Brown of San Antonio. Walter married Ada Wyatt of Floresville, and Johnathon James Polley, an attorney at Floresville, never married.

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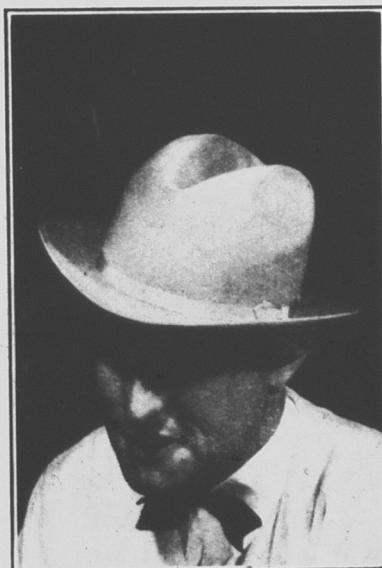


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